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Report on Visit to East Timor. 30th Jan -1st Feb 1991.

by John Briggs.

In making this report I wish to emphasise the brevity of the exposure to the Timorese situation-only some 48 hours- with an ecclesiastical focus to the activities for most of the time.

As I said to the press, it was rather like somebody coming to England and being involved in church services in and around London and then being asked for their personal eyewitness reaction to the situation in Ulster. Such a judgement cannot , with integrity , be offered. The subsequent press reports of my visit were, I understand, quite lacking in the balance which I asked them to respect and , in particular, excluded the reference I made to the concern of the WCC to be informed of hurts and pains within Timorese society.

To prepare myself I spent a day in London with the Catholic Institute for International Relations(CIIR) who provided me with excellent documentation on the situation in East Timor which helpfully supplemented the material sent by PCR. To this I added a briefing session with the Reverend F.W.Raintung (secretary of the Churches' Participation in Development of the PGI, and one of his colleagues in the PGI in Jakarta.

The ecclesiastical occasions have been reflected on in my report on the Christian Churches' application to join the WCC. Basically these were: 1) the worship service on the first night, followed by a social meeting with members of the Synod. 2) Visits, with services, to Liquica and Ermera and 3) an evening meeting with Synod members on the second day. 4) A meeting with the Bishop's representative and 5) a visit to the Eucharistic Chapel in western Dili and to the pastor of that congregation and the Guest House for the Timorese Church being built there.

It will be appreciated that the opportunities for apprehending the situation more widely were limited, confined in fact to courtesy visits to the Governor and the military commander immediately after arrival and , at my request,a visit to a typical unit of housing for somebody in the lower middle class; a visit to the market and scattered deductions one could make from other meetings.

The Governor demonstrated considerable charm in his eloquent defence of Indonesian policy towards East Timor which covered the events of 1975, together with the background to more recent developments. The baseline for his presentation was Portugal's gross under-development of the region; the previous history of civil war in the province and the peaceful invasion of East Timor in 1942 by the Australians, to defend East Timor when a neutralised Portugal declined to do so. The Governor spent time in two concentration camps and therefore had personal experiences of Japanese cruelty. He claimed that during the Japanese occupation the population of the territory reduced from 400,000 to 300,000.

I am not sure that any good will be served by setting down the Governor's account of the events of 1975-6 and I was certainly in no position to contest the detail of it , stage by stage. He admitted that initially very few people supported the policy of integration but argued that the Portuguese arming of FRETELIN led to the UDT,the Social Democratic group, converting to the integrationist position. In anticipation of a FRETELIN coup to seize power in the interests of independence,the UDT invited the Indonesians to come in to support what was now claimed as the majority position against an externally-armed FRETELIN.

Thereafter, it was argued, the Indonesian government pursued a two-pronged strategy; that is, military activity on the one hand to seek to pacify the region, accompanied by a programme of development to improve living conditions. For the first four years this was less than was desirable and was confined to a crash programme to deal with refugees from FRETELIN activity. But thereafter a more coherent plan was developed to develop education, agriculture, roads, health services and to establish a system of local government. In the Fifth Repelita,1988-93,village development was added to the list.

The achievements of this programme were then identified:

1976	Illiteracy	92% of the population
1991	Illiteracy	21% of the population

Pre 1976	Only ten Timorese graduates.
1991	200 graduates with a further 1000 students in training throughout the Republic, though this presented problems because education was expanding more rapidly than the jobs which could absorb the energies of the new graduates leading to the establishment of pilot projects to develop new job opportunities.
1976	20 kms of asphalted road.
1991	over 1000 kms of asphalted roads and a number of critical bridge building projects completed.
1976	12 doctors in the province
1991	100 doctors in the province ,providing a ratio of 1:7,000,though only 2 or 3 of the doctors so far are Timorese.

In addition the Governor offered the following contrast in membership in the Catholic Church :

1976	230,000
1991	580,000

In replying to the Governor, I apologised for the reduction in the scale of the WCC delegation in the context of quite exceptional world circumstances. I referred to General Simitupang's association with the WCC. The brochure "Regional Investment in East Timor" certainly made impressive claims for

the Indonesian Government's concern for the development of the province. However, I indicated to the Governor that I would not be showing proper candour to him if I did not express to him that human rights groups around the world continued to be concerned about the abuse of human rights and the lack of freedom within the province. I did not believe that the achievements of a development programme, as such, answered that issue and that the proper political ambitions and aspirations of the Timorese people, therefore, remain unanswered. I note here that the Governor seemed to espouse a form of economic determinism in his regard for the picture of East Timor which sat at odds with his very clear anti-communism, which came out clearly when he spoke about the overthrow of the Salazar dictatorship in Portugal by 'those heavily inclined to the left'.(He knew this, he said, because of his experience of leftist movements in Portugal while a student in Lisbon). It was almost as if he regretted the passing of the Salazar regime or at least saw the change as being attended by considerable dangers. He is , of course, married into a Portuguese family. I began to think that the baseline for considering the situation in East Timor was as much the coup against the communists in Indonesia in 1963 as the war in 1975.

A question to the Governor asking for the protection of the cultural identity of the East Timorese elicited a rather trivial answer about encouraging local dances, an insufficiency of teachers to give training in the local language and the fact that there were considerable linguistic rivalries within the island which allowed for no simple solution.

I put to the Governor that it was reported in England that a new situation was emerging in East Timor with the focus moving from the military resistance of FRETELIN in the mountains, to peaceful demonstrations in urban areas, which were supported by a much more broadly-based coalition of opposition interests, of which FRETELIN is but one small part.

The Governor claimed that the demonstrations were confined to Dili and that the situation had led to a number of arrests because the demonstrations had led on to the destruction of property.He claimed the numbers involved were small; only 16 actual demonstrators on the occasion of the Pope's visit, perhaps 50-70 on the occasion of the American Ambassador's visit on 17th January 1990 and maybe 50-100 people in the demonstration of 4th October. 30-40 arrests had been made, though it was not clear to me whether that was a total or confined to the last incident. He did not refer to the arrest made the previous week, which I learned about only on my arrival in Australia.

Two admissions were made. First that the previous military commander had been over-zealous and had been replaced by a less repressive colleague. Secondly that the Republic of Indonesia had been over-cautious in keeping the island a closed province for too long, but now visitors were welcome. Pressed on the more recent arrests of students from the Catholic School , the Governor retreated into an explanation of that being caused by a misunderstanding. He also argued that the educational policy had produced more personnel than could immediately be encompassed within the economic system and this was creating some temporary problems that were being attended to.

The Governor would not yield on the notion of a more broadly-based coalition of opposition interests having now come into being. He held no personal animosity to FRETELIN leaders.In fact a former leader of FRETELIN had just been appointed as director of the Provincial Bank , but he could not give patronage to those who remained opposed to the Republic of Indonesia.

When pressed on the possibility of having a referendum, he argued that that was.not sensible because it would unleash tribal conflict which he believed was still present in the province and had been since the beginning of the century. This , he believed, still prevented the emergence in the Timorese situation of conviction politics over against ethnic/tribal politics.I was not impressed by this argument, though some support was lent to it by my discussion with the leaders of the young people's work, who also suggested that ethnic differences inhibited the fruitful development of their work.

The Governor alluded to the principles of Pancasila which were upheld throughout the Indonesian Republic. Apart from this and the issues of foreign policy, security, currency and justice, every province had autonomy for the development of their domestic policies.

Other issues pursued were the possibilities of the Timorese being swamped by migrants from other parts of Indonesia . This was dismissed with the notion that those from other islands were principally birds of passage and would produce few permanent residents. It did seem to be that within the economy and also the administration, there were currently quite a large number of non-Timorese, though assurance was given that Timorese leadership was increasing. Pressed on the issue of regularising relations with the United Nations, the argument was that Portugal was the stumbling block.

My overall impression was of a benign good-humoured administrator, over-confident of the impact of economic development, with a well-developed 'anti-communist' mind set. Though, not unexpectedly, the conversation yielded little that was conclusive, it was good mannered and could form a basis of trust for a more intensive follow-up, which the Governor indicated he would welcome. He specifically mentioned the WCC and the Roman Catholic Church as helpful agencies in this respect, leading me to wonder whether a joint delegation might not be a possibility.

The military commander was a Protestant Christian from Sulawesi.I gained the impression that he was a man widely respected in the community, not least by the Bishop's representative.

We began by talking about what constituted legitimate protest and, when that protest went beyond reasonable limits, what were the appropriate means of restraint. If it was granted that guerillas need a base of support from within the population to be successful in their operations,thus the question: what programmes was he implementing to take that base of support and consent away from the guerillas.The answer given was basically the improvement of living conditions by a more effective harnessing of the economy and the investment of external capital funds to that end. Legitimate protest, I was told,was fine until property was put under threat. Unfortunately local officers had over-reacted in their endeavours to maintain order. It was his practice always to discipline the action of such officers. I would like to know how the system

of justice and the penalties imposed compare with the situation pertaining elsewhere in Indonesia.

The military commander strenuously denied a figure of 40 people executed. He produced the figure and then denied it, but provided no date range. He suggested that most imprisonments were of a temporary nature and were followed by release after a few days.

Again I stressed the poor image the government has throughout the world, in respect of its human rights, mentioning also the government's refusal to allow Amnesty International to monitor the Timorese situation. The military commander replied that he would not object to any group coming to monitor the situation in East Timor, as long as they came with ' good intent'. Indeed he would welcome a visit by a larger delegation of the WCC, agreeing that it would be necessary to have a detailed agreed agenda rather than swapping rhetoric. An investigation could not be accomplished in less than two weeks, with access very generally to the whole of the life of the province. My judgement would be it should meet with the authorities at the end of their investigation, rather than at the beginning, or at least in addition to a first meeting.

Pressed to extend the argument about executions and imprisonments and those who had disappeared , he argued that this arose out of self-judgement from the individuals concerned who, knowing that they had committed offences, took themselves to different areas of the country.

Like the Governor , the military commander showed a very complete faith in the gospel of development's capacity to overcome political opposition and he was made well aware that we found the answer less than convincing, though it posed the question whether the development investment in East Timor is as much a response to external concern and pressure as to Timorese needs per se.

Bishop Bela was detained in Baucau and therefore, though several attempts were made , no meeting was possible. This I understand is not unusual. Thus on the finaL morning we met with his deputy, a Timorese priest who spoke reasonable English. It became clear that he had a good relationship with the military commander and took up individual cases with him. The cases seemed to be frequent but he suggested that satisfaction was generally secured.

We discussed the protest behaviour of students from the Catholic school and the change of Rector there. This latter was explained as an administrative change and the action on the former as an unfortunate misunderstanding.

Pressed on the number of political prisoners or prisoners of conscience in East Timor he gave a figure of 9 or 10 and set that number in the context of a pattern of increasing releases of the same. One, he suggested, had been released the day before. He also indicated that the leadership of FRETELIN had, be believed, been in the Ermera area on the previous day or the day before that, that is, around the time of our visit. When asked what the World Council of Churches could do to help the situation in East Timor, he suggested that a letter should be sent to the Governor, giving credit for what was being achieved in development terms but expressing the ongoing concern of the world

Christian family at the continued incarceration of prisoners of conscience and the limitations to freedom of political expression in the province, underlining the hope that the progress that had been made in these areas could be continued. The bishop's representative led me to believe that the context was a dynamic one and that the situation was much better than in previous years.

I was introduced to a young Timorese graduate Catholic Development Officer, staying at the PGI Guest House in Jakarta who supported that analysis. I tried to press him on points of difficulty and dissatisfaction but the general message was that development was securing its goals, to the benefit of the inhabitants of the province.

My ability to take the temperature of life was limited by the fact that the first day was largely ceremonial. Comparing the atmosphere prevailing with my experience of El Salvador I did not get the impression of the dominance of any psychology of fear , that was very clear in El Salvador. That could be either because it does not exist or because my visit was specially stage-managed. But simply walking around that market suggested to me both a good range of available goods and people's capacity to buy them. We had conversation with one individual , whose home we visited, apparently 'on spec' at my request. He seemed well content, his children were in school, he had developed his house as he was able, without incurring debt. Drinkable water was available nearby though I did not judge the garden offered much opportunity to support the family budget with animal or vegetable husbandry, though a little was being undertaken in this respect. Eye infections were the most commonly seen health defect. I asked about medical services and was told there was a nearby clinic for which there was no formal charge, but voluntary contributions were encouraged.

Travelling by road to Liquica and Ermera there was no very obvious military presence in the countryside, though there was some military at Ermera. Here, before the church service, I was introduced , at a church luncheon, to the regional executive, the military commander, the head of justice and the chairman of the local council, with whom I pursued a similar agenda of questions to that I used in Dili. The first three were not Timorese and none of these dignataries attended the service. By contrast the Hosanna congregation in Dili clearly embraces both those engaged in government and the leading economic sectors. The protestant congregations struck me as remarkably heterogeneous,stretching from illiterate people who greeted me with tribal dancing,to quite sophisticated young teachers serving in East Timor at the behest of the Communion of Protestant Churches, with a number of gradings in between. The Protestant view of the situation in the province is coloured by persecution under the Portuguese with greater freedom after the Indonesian invasion.

CONCLUDING QUESTIONS:

1. Should I write (as suggested above) to the Governor?

2. Is a follow-up visit desirable and , if so, on what basis? Noting that the Christian Conference of Asia may have something of this sort on their agenda.

John Briggs.

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